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# THE NIGER:

A Prize Poem,

IN THE THEATRE, OXFORD,

JUNE XII, M DCCCL.

BY

WILLIAM ALLAN RUSSELL,

*Lusby Scholar, Magdalen Hall.*

SECOND EDITION.

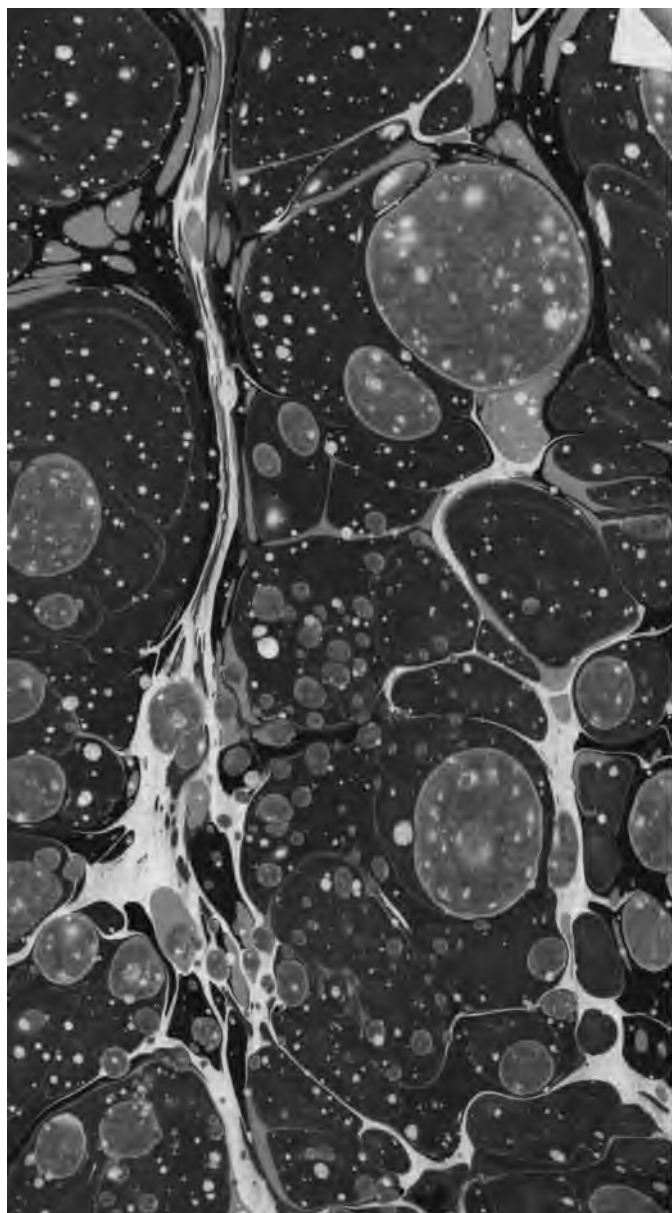


Oxford:

G. SHRIMPTON, BROAD STREET.

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## THE NIGER.

DARK-rolling billows heaving evermore,  
Lonely and vast, by many a fabled shore :  
Far in the gleaming empire of the Sun,  
Age after age the lordly stream hath run,  
From secret source which mortal ne'er hath seen,  
Deep-hidd'n perchance, where never sound hath been  
Or sign of life,—where tropic summers glow  
On silent peaks of everlasting snow ;  
Down in his mystic depths unfathom'd lies  
The mirror'd blaze of Afric's cloudless skies ;  
No ports hath he ; along his mighty tide  
No traffic sounds, no laden galleons ride,  
While calm as sleep, or crisp'd by sultry airs  
Whisp'ring wild music in his reedy lairs,—  
Or swoll'n by tropic rains, careering strong,  
Like rushing hosts his waters speed along,—



(E'en as they flow'd when all the earth was young,  
 A mystery e'en in fable darkly sung)—  
 'Till gliding, shadow-like, from light of day,  
 Lost 'neath the desert sands they wind their sunless  
           way.

Thus whisper'd Fame ; and wondrous tales there be  
 Told by the quaint old sire of History,  
 Weaver of golden fables, of a land  
 Of fire and drought, and ocean-wastes of sand,  
 And a great river of the torrid zone, \*  
 By a far city flowing all unknown,  
 Where dwelt the ebon children of the Sun,  
 A race of dwarfs, enchanters every one.  
 Nor unexplor'd the dim Atlantic shore  
 By Egypt, mother of primeval lore,  
 Where Hanno saw the blazing peaks of light  
 Reddening with flame the sable brow of night.  
 Oft too the wonder-loving Arab told,  
 How, by fair tow'rs and mosques that burn'd with  
           gold,  
 From ancient times the great Dark Water roll'd,  
 And bright-dom'd palace swept in silence by,  
 And cities of the waste, beneath a rosy sky :  
 There sultans reign'd, the Prophet's faithful sons,  
 Girt by mute crowds of swarthy myrmidons ;

\* Herod. ii. 32, 33. διηξιλοήσας δὲ χῶρον πολλὸν ψαμμῶδια . . . .  
 ἰσιλιθίῳ ἀνδρας μικροὺς . . . . χροῖμα δὲ μέλανας· παρὰ δὲ τὴν πόλιν εἶναι  
 ποταμὸν μέγαν . . . καὶ τὸς οὗτοι ἀπίσαντο ἀνθρώπους γίγτας εἶναι πάντας

And theirs were marts with goodly bales heap'd high,  
Spice, and red gold, and milk-white ivory,  
And priceless freightage brought from many a land  
By the fleet desert-ship o'er seas of sand.

Throughout the list'ning nations 'gan prevail,  
In later times, the negro captive's tale,  
A simple tale, for sorrow made it plain ;  
Sadly he thought of home, who felt the chain,  
Sadly he spoke of native dale and hill,  
In a strange land, to please a tyrant's will ;  
Scarce he recall'd the scenes of early years,  
Where grief had blotted memory's page with tears,  
The fight,—the captive's march,—the ocean crost,—  
A foreign rule,—and home for ever lost :  
But this brief story fir'd th' adventurous mind,  
And rous'd to pity spirits wise and kind,  
Till Wilberforce annull'd the guilty laws,  
And Park went forth a pilgrim in his cause.

'Tis tropic noon ! and not a single sound  
Breathes on th' eternal stillness all around ;  
'Tis tropic noon, and yet the sultry time  
Seems like the twilight of some fairy clime.  
Spreading in lone luxuriance round is seen  
The mangrove's tangled maze of sombre green ;  
Thro' mists that dwell ~~those~~ baleful fens upon  
Large-orb'd and pale peers out the shrouded Sun,

And, struggling sickly thro' the vapourous day,  
Dull on the windless water falls the pallid ray.  
So slumb'ringly the glassy river goes,  
The water-lily dips not, as it flows;  
The swallow, haunter of the charmèd spot,  
Skims thro' the silence, and awakes it not;  
Perch'd as in sleep, the grey king-fisher broods,  
A sentinel among the solitudes;  
And faints the breeze beneath the heavy sky,  
Nor bends the bulrush, as it loiters by  
Thro' long green walls of forest-trees, that throw  
Unwavering shadows in the flood below;  
And droops from topmost boughs, (like garlands dight  
By elfin hands,) the gaudy parasite,  
Crowning the wave with flow'rs, and high above  
The tall acacia moves, or seems to move  
Its feathery foliage in the enamour'd air,  
That seems, tho' all unheard, to linger there.  
Might'st fancy all, the earth, the air, the stream,  
Still unawaken'd from Creation's dream.  
When, hark! there sounds along the lonely shore  
A voice those wilds had never heard before;  
(So rings the axe throughout the sleeping wood,  
And scares the Dryads in their solitude;)  
The stranger echo stole along the wave;  
The dreaming groves a mellow'd answer gave;  
The wild bird dipp'd—the diamond-ey'd gazelle  
*Started and paus'd,—then fled into the dell;*

Stirr'd by no breeze, the tree-tops seemed to sigh—  
When, lo! again the still-repeated cry ;  
Hark! 'tis the leadsman, chaunting long and clear  
The changing fathoms as a ship draws near,—  
And all at once rings out the Briton's hearty cheer !  
Seethes the dark flood beneath her plashing wheel,  
And leap the cloven billows from her keel,  
Till, far retreating to the water's edge,  
They rise and sink among the swaying sedge ;  
The swaying sedge mysterious tidings bore,  
Nodding and whisp'ring far along the shore ;  
The murmuring shore of strange invader tells,  
And water-spirits listen in their cells.  
A crew of Britons on the Niger's wave !  
They glide as in a dream! the young, the brave,  
And Science' thoughtful sons are gather'd there—  
The negro's friend—the hardy mariner :  
Oh! who can tell—but they whose hearts beat high  
With the wild ardour of Discovery—  
The thrill that hails each wonder-waking sight,  
And gives to danger's self a keen delight ?  
Oh! who can tell, what pleasing awe, to seem,  
(As oft in childhood, or in eastern dream,)  
Venturing on some enchanter's realm unknown,  
The first to break the spell,—and wand'ring on  
Where as the thronging beauties round us rise,  
Grows the wild joy and ev'ry terror dies!

Thus were they dauntless, tho' around them there  
Death's shadowy legions hover'd in the air,  
Unseen, unheard, yet mightier far to slay  
Than that fell dragon, who, as fables say,  
Guarded by day and night, in fierce unrest,  
The golden-fruited gardens of the West.

Onward they far'd, 'till ere the daylight's close,  
From that worn crew Devotion's voice arose ;  
Around a reverent man in earnest pray'r  
Gather'd they stood, with sun-burnt foreheads bare :  
And oh ! the solemn voice—the place—the time—  
The glorious mission—and th' enchanted clime—  
The thought of home, of friends, of native soil,  
Far, far away—the brotherhood of toil—  
Made their hearts full, and all their souls as one ;  
And oft as each his comrade look'd upon,  
They felt the tie which they alone can feel,  
Whose common peril makes a common weal ;  
And weather-beaten cheeks were wet with tears,  
That haply ne'er had flow'd since childhood's years,  
As peal'd o'er Niger's wave, ne'er heard till then,  
The hopeful heart's accord—the loud "Amen."  
Never, I ween, did pray'r more solemn sound,  
In gothic fane, the hallow'd walls around,—  
Where white-rob'd quires discourse the tuneful scrolls,  
And volum'd music from the organ rolls,—

Than from that lonely crew, in that lone hour :  
And, like the spell of some benignant pow'r,  
The sacred echo floated far away  
Thro' sunless dells, where, shrinking from the day,  
The fiends of demon-worship cower'd to hear  
That still small voice proclaim their fall was near ;  
Echo of hope, which, as the years flow on,  
Shall swell into the full and perfect tone !  
Omen of joyful sound, that seem'd to be  
A pledge of love, and light, and liberty.

Their voices died, as died the ling'ring light ;  
Vanish'd the sun, and o'er the earth was night ;  
Night in the tropics ! Nature's choicest boon  
To the scorch'd subject of the tyrant sun,  
And lovely, with her starry diadems,  
As a dark beauty spangled o'er with gems.  
Soon as the ev'ning breeze blows calm around,  
Thro' Afric's land the song and dance resound,  
Till night becomes for them a charm'd day,  
While on the sand, yet warm with noontide ray,  
Or in the forest, 'neath the well-known tree,  
The dusky revellers hold their jubilee.  
Not as in northern clime, pale-quivering far  
Thro' the cold azure glimmers each lone star ;  
But the full planets seem to glow more near,  
And liquid lustre rains from ev'ry sphere ;

And moonlight falls, not as in saintly aisle,  
Silvering the darkness with an icy smile,  
Cold as the marble knights along the walls,—  
But o'er Creation, like a mantle, falls,  
Mellowing the face of things with magic hue  
That makes the heav'n more deeply, darkly, blue.

On such a night, 'mid fragrant grasses deep,  
In Acardy, Endymion lay asleep—  
Or sage Chaldee, on some lone hill and high,  
Read the bright volume of the fateful sky—  
On such a night, while round him slept his foes,  
Bold Park awhile forgot a captive's woes—  
Park, who had brav'd upon his lonely way,  
The storm by night, the fiercer sun by day,  
And mark'd (his only guide) by lightning's glare,  
The needle pointing toward the northern star,—  
Emblem of Him, whose high unconquer'd will,  
Nor quail'd nor swerv'd, but pointed onward still.  
Far from the thirsty waste, in homeward dream,  
He'd wander to his native Yarrow's stream ;  
Or wake to watch the yellow moonlight pour,  
Thro' his white tent, upon the sandy floor,  
And bless the sacred tranquil hour that brought  
Respite from scorn, and time for soaring thought ;  
And there, 'mid ruthless Moors, unfriended, lone,  
With a stout heart, and Heav'n to guide him on,

He wrote his labours on the faithful page  
That tells the traveller's tale from age to age ;  
While the great thought of what mankind would gain  
Sublim'd his toils, and sanctified the chain.—  
And such a night those weary seamen blest  
With its cool paradise of timely rest ;  
And sweet it was the ev'ning breeze to feel,  
Low-murmuring o'er their throbbing temples steal—  
The breeze, that slept through all the noontide hours,  
Now waking from its bed of luscious flow'rs,  
And wafting, as it kiss'd the moonlit wave,  
Its incense rare to ev'ry nook and cave :  
And sweet to list, amid the silence there  
The hum of insect-music in the air :  
And sweet, the myriad fireflies' play to mark,  
Gemming the shade with many-twinkling spark :  
And sweet the native boatman's song to hear'  
Among the reeds, that told a village near ;  
And, as they glide, to see before them soon  
The cone-shap'd huts white-gleaming in the moon.  
Then on the silence burst a sudden cry  
Of savage welcome, and discordant joy,  
And shone the signal-fires with ruddy glow,  
On dusky crowds, that hurried to and fro,  
And tom-toms beat, and hollow conch-shells blew,  
As on they rush'd to see the white man's "Fire-  
canoe :"



And old men vow'd was ne'er such gathering known,  
Since solemn feast was held or war-pipe blown.

The native council met with dawn of light,—  
Dark-visag'd senators in<sup>b</sup> robes of white ;  
Men who had learn'd the wisdom taught by years,  
Courtiers of Nature, patriarchal peers :  
In stature first behold their monarch wild,  
A warrior-chief,—a despot,—and a child ;  
Burden'd with many-colour'd vesture quaint,  
And the rude pomp of cumbrous ornament.  
He spoke :—his slaves conceal'd from vulgar gaze  
The royal lips, and heard in mute amaze ;  
His muffled voice beneath a screen of fans  
Seem'd to the wond'ring savage more than man's.  
Vain without art, he vaunted his renown,  
Told of great village-kings, who fear'd his frown,  
And deign'd the white man's glitt'ring gifts to prize,  
To shew our Queen found favour in his eyes :  
With reverent air the Briton heard, the while,  
His childlike boast—nor heard without a smile.

And such their king ; a hamlet for a state,  
A hut his palace, he is passing great ;  
His fleet the long canoe ; a host to him  
Some hundred half-clad warriors, lithe of limb ;

<sup>b</sup> See account of native costume in Captain Trotter's *expedition*.

His are the customs of their little mart,  
And his the first-fruits of their infant art ;  
He reigns an emperor, for his power, in all  
But cares and perils, is imperial.

A simple race he rules, that know no toil ;  
The sun and show'r are tillers of their soil ;  
Theirs is the lotus, bringing dreamy calm,  
The shade of cotton tree, the wine of palm ;  
And theirs the soul, sworn enemy to sorrow,  
Joyous to-day, and careless of to-morrow ;  
By Niger's banks, more rich than Egypt's Nile,  
They bask in Nature's ever-beaming smile,—  
Nature, who crowns from her unfailing hoard,  
Th' uncostly dwelling, and the healthful board.  
Not theirs the lot to guide, with reeking brow,  
The steer slow-toiling at the stubborn plough ;  
On mould unwrought the sowers fling the grain,  
Pacing in time to some old village-strain :  
Beside them flock the merry neighbours all,  
And the blithe toil becomes a festival.

For them no records of the past unfold  
The time-taught wisdom, and the deeds of old ;  
Their only chronicler, a minstrel rude,  
Sings the wild tale of many a fiery feud,  
While ancient warriors, kindling as they hear,  
Forget their age, and, trembling, grasp the spear.

Or oft at eve, a reverend company,  
Their counsel-house the shade of some old tree,  
The grey-head chiefs discuss in sage debate  
The weighty trifles of their village-state.  
Or, while from many a pipe of river-reed,  
Curls wreathèd incense of the Indian weed,  
They tell with wonder grave the legend old  
Of yellow gnome that haunts the mine<sup>c</sup> of gold  
With many a fearful tale of sorcery,  
And fate that lightens from the evil eye,  
And white-stol'd forest-sprite, with floating hair,  
Whom the benighted wanderer calls in pray'r,  
And in the lonely echo seems to hear  
Mysterious spirit-voices answering near.

A green old age, nor crabb'd by carking care,  
The ancient dwellers of the Niger share :  
Youth's flame still warms them, flickering tho' it be,  
As winter's sunbeam gilds the leafless tree ;  
And as they watch the moonlight revellers play,  
They grow in memory's dream, as blithe as they ;  
Or muse of spiritland, where, one by one,  
Calm-journeying, dame and maiden, sire and son,  
Shall meet in ever-during rest, and be  
Where spoiler spoils not, and where slaves are free.

<sup>c</sup> Discovery and Adventures in Africa. By H. Murray,  
Professor Jamieson, &c., &c.

Shall then the sons of Ham for ever have  
No peace but death—no freedom but the grave ?  
What tho' th' ancestral curse upon his race  
'Neath torrid suns decreed their dwelling-place ?  
What tho' his brethren of the north outvie  
The tropic man in deeds of mastery ?  
Kind Nature, than his brother-man more kind,  
Gave him the enduring frame, the simple mind,  
The love of home, whose heart-awakening glow  
Endears the tropic waste, the northern snow ;  
He lov'd the burning sun that saw his birth,  
He lov'd his lowly patriarchal hearth ;  
Why tear him from his sunny home, to toil  
'Neath skies unblest, upon a sterner soil ?  
Gaze, if a tyrant's eye to gaze can dare,  
Upon that living image of despair :  
The childlike smoothness of that ebon brow  
Behold ! it never knew a care till now.  
What speaking stone, what painted woe, could trace  
The simple sorrows of that passive face,  
When struggling thro' despair's dull apathy,  
Rolls the big tear-drop from his vacant eye,  
As off in speechless trance he sees once more  
His father's hearth, and treads his native shore ?  
And as his brethren hail him free from harm  
The fetter clanks upon his outstretch'd arm,  
Breaks the sweet dream of misery's brief repose,  
And wakes the captive to a life of woes !

Yet his are virtues which no rule imparts,  
The generous growth of wild untutor'd hearts.  
Bear witness, Park, who heard'st with tearful eye  
The negro maiden's song of sympathy ;  
And witness ye—but, ha ! your voice is dumb—  
There rise no praises from th' adventurer's tomb.

By Niger's bank they rest, who in the pride  
And strength of self-devotion, conqu'ring, died.  
Children of peril—nurslings of the seas—  
Steel'd to all harm, but Afric's dire disease.  
Withering, resistless, as the simoom's blast,  
Thro' the wrung frame the subtle fever past—  
And left a spectre, hollow-ey'd and wan,  
A nerveless, mindless, ruin of a man.  
Pitying and wond'ring with a tearful awe,  
Himself unscath'd, the gentle Negro saw  
Palsied the mind that he had lov'd to obey—  
The strength in which he trusted, waste away.  
And oft he haunts where dropp'd the farewell tear  
From grateful eyes upon the white man's bier.  
O'er that lone grave no sculptur'd mourners weep  
Where evermore those high adventurers sleep—  
Art's ill-beseeming splendours mark it not,—  
But Nature's beauty consecrates the spot,  
Cluster'd with bright-ey'd flow'rets breathing balm,  
Fring'd with rare grasses, canopied with palm ;

And gentle hearts are mindful of the brave  
Who came—who died, their suffering race to save.

Fir'd by the visions of a future day,  
Hope shall advance, where martyrs led the way;  
'Till men shall cry, on Afric's burning plain,  
"Park hath not died, nor Lander toil'd in vain!"—  
There is a majesty by Niger's flood,—  
A rapture in the wild primeval wood,—  
Glorious th' all-present blaze of Afric's noon,  
And sweet the charm'd light of tropic moon;  
And earth is bounteous, Nature heav'nly fair,—  
But ah! the mind of man is darken'd there!  
More proudly then the Niger's stream shall flow,  
When man shall learn Heav'n's kind intent to know;  
And not less wildly grand shall Nature be,  
When in his land the Negro dwelleth free,—  
And lovelier shall the charm'd moonlight shine  
On peaceful village, and on Christian shrine.

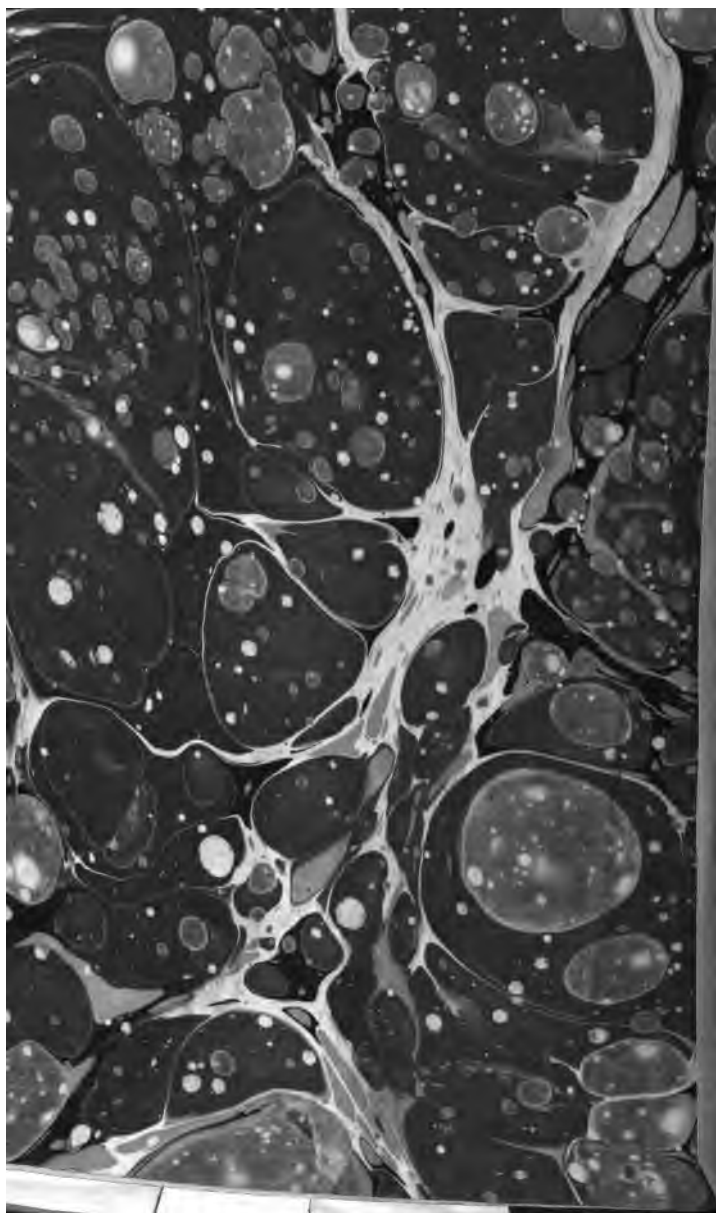
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